

Feature Story

The Presidio Experiment

To keep it a national park, this Bay Area jewel will require a unique combination of private and public funding.

Courtney O'Hara

Stretching along the spectacular shores of San Francisco Bay, the sprawling former military base known as the Presidio evokes powerful images and emotions.

For San Franciscans, the Presidio is an important part of the community's culture and charm. As the city grew, the Army post guarded its bay and harbor, protecting its commerce and trade. Presidio troops led recovery and relief efforts after the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and again in the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake.

As an open U.S. Army post, the Presidio provided Bay Area residents with high quality recreation—hiking along wind-swept coastal bluffs, biking along waterfront paths and quaint streets, running on Crissy Field, or sunbathing on Baker Beach. Now part of the National Park System, the Presidio's breathtaking scenery, lush foliage, and historic fortifications and buildings continue to enrich the lives of residents and visitors to the City by the Bay.

For the National Park Service, the Presidio is one of the most historically important sites in the United States with 200 years of history and 2000 years of archeology. "It had active and important involvement in every major American war since 1846," says **NPS Director Roger Kennedy**, "possesses the most comprehensive collection of military architecture in the United States, especially coastal fortifications, and one of the earliest and best preserved Army airfields in the nation."

And for others in the Bay Area community and around the nation, the Presidio represents a pivotal test—an experiment in urban park financing to preserve the integrity of this unique national park site. The focus of this national attention is an ambitious plan to demonstrate that a public-private partnership can make the Presidio thrive.

The Omnibus Parks and Land Management Act of 1996 created a Trust to manage cooperatively with the NPS the Presidio's 1,480 acres. The Presidio Trust will establish a 15-year plan to generate income for the national park. Federal funding for the Presidio, about \$25 million in fiscal year 1997, will be reduced over the 15-year period.

The Presidio Trust—a public corporation with a seven-member board of directors—is mandated to both protect the Presidio as a unit of the National Park System and make it financially self-sustaining. Either Secretary Babbitt or his designee will sit on the board. Among its authorities, the Trust has broad powers to lease and manage the site's historic buildings, borrow up to \$50 million from the U.S. Treasury, guarantee up to 75 percent of the principal of park development loans, and hire its own staff.

At left, a younger generation of Bay Area residents learns about habitat preservation and wildlife conservation on a school trip to the Presidio.



Above, hikers along the Presidio's bluffs and beaches, can enjoy spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean, the entrance to San Francisco Bay, and the Golden Gate Bridge. Photo by Brenda Tharpe



The Presidio was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962 in part because of its unique collection of 474 historic structures, including those shown above, representing every major construction period of U.S. military history since 1848. Photos by Brenda Tharpe

Citadel of the West Coast

The Presidio, the oldest continuously operated military post in the United States, tells several chapters of North American history, including native Ohlone history, Spanish and Mexican colonization, the California Gold Rush, American western frontier settlement, Asian immigration, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, and U.S. military involvement in the Pacific.

Before European occupation, the native Ohlone people built seasonal camps and hunted the shorelines on what are now Presidio lands. Beginning in 1776 with the Spanish arrival, the flags of three nations eventually flew over the lands which control the gateway to San Francisco Bay. After Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, the Mexican flag was raised over the Presidio from 1822 until 1846. U.S. occupation began with **General John C. Fremont** and **Kit Carson** capturing the Castillo de San Joaquin, today's Fort Point, two years before the Mexican-American War ended in 1848.

From the Mexican American war through Operation Desert Storm, the Presidio has played a role in every major U.S. military effort. Significant events include expanding housing and hospital facilities to support troops during the Spanish American war; developing Crissy Field as the first west coast defense air station, training troops sent to the Pacific from 1941-1945, ordering the internment of Japanese-Americans during the World War II, and building a Nike missile launch site during the Cold War.

Under the American flag, the Presidio was not only tied closely to national military efforts but also to the local community and to the national parks. U.S. cavalry troops, stationed at the Presidio, patrolled Yosemite and other national parks until the National Park Service was founded in 1916.

The Journey from Post to Park

One of the newest additions to the National Park System, the Presidio began its journey from post to park more than twenty five years ago. In the early 1970s, **Congressman Phil Burton**, as chairman of the House Interior oversight committee, initiated legislation as part of the "parks to the people" plan to establish Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

The site includes coastal bluffs, towering redwoods, dramatic shorelines, historic forts and islands, and former military installations. Burton had the foresight to include a clause that if the Army determined the Presidio to be in excess of its needs, it would become part of the park.

In 1989, the Department of Defense's Base Realignment and Closure Commission proposed to close the Presidio as an active Army post. Within five years, the Sixth Army's headquarters was to transfer and the National Park Service was to assume jurisdiction of the Presidio. To prepare for the transfer, the Park Service launched a four-year planning process to draw ideas from the community, to inventory resources, and to create a shared vision for the future Presidio.

The Trust's Origins

The legislation is a compromise of sorts. The Bay Area community and past Congresses clearly wanted the Presidio to become an integral part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area when the post was no longer needed by the Department of Defense. The NPS acquired the Presidio at a financially difficult time, however, when the entire federal government is under pressure from budget cutting and downsizing.

Among the most expensive parks in the national park system, the Presidio's annual operating costs are about \$27 million. Yet, even at that level, the Presidio budget could not provide enough money for capital improvements to the park's many older buildings that are in need of extensive renovation. This rehabilitation would cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

With the looming 15-year timeframe, some San Franciscans have expressed concerns that the Trust may place more emphasis on the profit-making potential of the Presidio's prime real estate than on the preservation of an historic national treasure.

"It's a tragic mistake," warns **Joel Ventresca**, a member of the city of San Francisco's environmental commission. "It is the first conversion of a national park into a business park run by a private sector-type board of directors with awesome powers. It is the first time that a national park would be required to show a profit. They are trying to turn national parks into cash registers."

Other conservation groups, however, endorse the public-private partnership. "There are some who are simply ideologically opposed to making use of the private sector," says **Michael Alexander** of the Sierra Club. "Their view is that the National Park Service ought to run it, and the public ought to pay for it."

Most Bay Area community leaders endorse the trust experiment and would agree with **Robert Chandler**, the Park Service's former general manager for the Presidio Project, who believes that the Trust legislation creates the best mechanism to preserve the Presidio's historical and natural integrity while driving down operating costs. He points out that the legislation keeps the Presidio as a national park and requires the trust to act in accordance with the park's General Management Plan.

"If they acted against these values, there would be such a tremendous hue and cry that it just wouldn't happen," Chandler says. "Once the Trust is formed,



The NPS formed a planning team to undertake a public involvement process and ultimately develop a General Management Plan. Between 1990-1992, two main components propelled the planning process: NPS planners surveyed all cultural, natural, and building resources and conducted vision workshops throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. In the summer of 1992, the Park Service presented consolidated concepts reflecting the public's ideas and preferences for the future Presidio.

Over the next year, planners converted these ideas into a draft General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement. Sixty days of public review and hearings channeled comments to

The former general manager of the Presidio, Robert Chandler, at far left, points out landmarks during President Clinton visit last year. The President strongly endorsed the Presidio Trust as a way to engage the private sector as well as other parts of the Bay Area community in the preservation of this national treasure. "With many national parks at risk and in disrepair, a strong bipartisan effort to maintain and improve them is essential," the President said in his June 9 address. Emphasizing the private sector's role in preserving these national treasures, the President discussed the need for "support from citizens to offset taxpayer costs." Photo by Jay Blakesberg

the NPS which were incorporated into the Final General Management Plan, issued in July 1994.

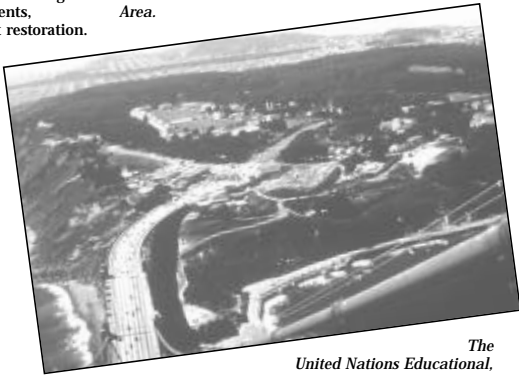
The Plan proposes that the Presidio's unparalleled collection of military architectural treasures and cultural landscapes will be preserved and enhanced. Its spectacular natural and recreational features will be perpetuated. This proposal reflects the convergence of community vision and Park Service expertise. Bay Area residents are keenly aware of the need to preserve and learn about this resource.

several projects to support tenant needs, improve operations, and expand visitors' experiences. Together, the Army and the NPS agreed to use Department of Defense funds to begin modernizing the telecommunications system, upgrading the water treatment and distribution system, improving the roads, and repairing the electric power distribution system.

Essential environmental remediation projects have already been completed, including the removal of underground storage tanks, comprehensive surveys of lead and asbestos in the buildings and the development of detailed remediation strategies. Projects in progress include abating hazardous material, removing petroleum fuel lines, and cleaning up groundwater and soil. Community volunteers assist NPS staff daily in restoring wildlife habitat—one of the most successful and visible improvement projects on the Presidio. Rebuilding these natural systems helps to restore rare and endangered species.

In addition to general site improvements, the General Management Plan calls for the Presidio to become a model of environmental sustainability. Projects that advance this goal include the Greening of the Presidio—a three-day design workshop with follow-up projects that are developing an environmentally responsible transportation strategy, sustainable building design and construction, and recycling of materials from demolished buildings.

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization conferred the status of International Biosphere Reserve on Golden Gate National Recreation Area in 1988, confirming the integral role that distinct ecosystems play in an urban environment.